

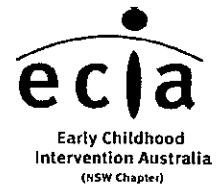
Submission  
No 557

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO  
STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

**Organisation:** Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter) Inc.  
**Name:** Ms Rosemary Flavel  
**Date received:** 26/02/2010

---

**Submission to the NSW Parliamentary  
Inquiry into the provision of education to students with  
a disability or special needs.**



Compiled from information provided by ECIA NSW members by:  
Rosemary Flavel  
*Executive Officer*  
**Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter) Inc.**

Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter) Inc. is the peak statewide organisation promoting the interests of young children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families. As an organisation, we have adopted a Position Statement on *Inclusion* (attached to the bottom of this submission), which makes particular reference to the early childhood years, but is also applicable to children with disabilities attending school.

The majority of our members are professionals working in the field of early childhood intervention (ECI) and are based in urban, rural and regional centres throughout NSW. A significant part of the ECI professional's role is assisting in children's transition to school, including collaborative planning with families and schools to meet the children's support needs in the classroom. Despite their diverse geographical locations, many of our members' experiences in supporting families to negotiate the school sector to secure a quality education for their children are quite similar.

**1. The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability.**

All involved in supporting the education of children with disabilities would acknowledge the deficits and inequities in funding levels available within the school system. Some of the issues include:

- Children who have been deemed in need of funding support within the early childhood education sector (pre-school and/or child care) may no longer qualify for such support when they transition to school, which would appear to be a major anomaly – especially given the self-evidently greater challenges a school

environment may present. This group can include those with severe delays in their communication, as well as children with mild intellectual disabilities (who generally do not qualify for additional targeted funding at all when they begin school).

- There is little or no transparency in how the available funds are distributed, or in the way they are actually used to support an individual child's educational programme. This can result in children with apparently very similar learning profiles receiving quite different levels of support, depending on the school attended. The existing resources available within a school do not seem to be a significant consideration when making funding allocations.
- A number of ECI services have reported instances where, as a result of an individual school's determination that the funding allocated is insufficient for them to adequately support the child's learning needs, families have been asked either to not send their child to school full-time, or to make a significant financial contribution towards covering costs such as teacher's aide time (which actually may not be the only, or most appropriate mechanism to meet the child's particular needs, but it is frequently seen as the default requirement by many schools).
- The level of funding provided to resource the enrolment of a child in an inclusive, mainstream class is frequently quite limited and does not match the full per capita infrastructure and staffing costs required to maintain a similar enrolment in a special school or support class. This can become a factor both in a family's choice of school for their child's enrolment – and in the recommendations made to them by school personnel, particularly when a child has significant support needs. All families should have the right to enrol their child in the school of their choice; and schools should feel sufficiently well-resourced with adequate funding levels and professional supports that allow them to offer appropriately individualised programmes to all their students.

**2. Best practice approaches in determining the allocation of funding to children with a disability, particularly whether allocation should be focussed on a student's function capacity rather than disability.**

- It is essential that funding allocations should not be based on a disability category, but on the child's actual support needs. NSW DET's enrolment procedure for children with disabilities includes the completion of a form which requests ratings be provided across a range of functional skills. While in principle this has merit, the rating categories are broad (and essentially deficit-focussed), so are often not able to accurately reflect an individual child's specific strengths and needs, and are therefore of questionable assistance in educational programming. In addition, there remains considerable pressure in many school regions for an IQ assessment to form part of the enrolment application, despite this not being an obligatory requirement.
- This emphasis during the enrolment process on the deficits associated with the child's disability is especially stressful for families, as there is a sense of "pass or fail" about the whole process – and a constant focus on having to highlight what the child can't do as a means of accessing adequate support funds.
- An additional stressor for families is the delay that all-too-often occurs in the confirmation of their child's enrolment at a particular school and notification of the level of support that will be available to them. As well as being very unsettling for families, this is a major issue in the process of preparing the child for going to school, given the need for all young school starters to familiarise themselves with their future school environment through school-based orientation programmes. Such programmes are especially critical for many children with additional learning needs, so it is far from best educational practice when they miss this important opportunity – or undertake it at a school in which they might not eventually be enrolled.

**3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system.**

- The range of schooling options for families to choose between for their child's enrolment varies greatly, even within larger urban areas. If adequate levels of support were available to all children in all schools, and community attitudes (particularly those within schools) were supportive of the full inclusion of students with disabilities, the lack of such choices would not be a significant issue. However, in the current climate, this remains a major equity concern.

**4. The adequacy of integrated support services for children with a disability in mainstream settings such as school classrooms.**

Within-school knowledge of the range of support services available is extremely variable, as is the apparent willingness to make collaborative use of such services. Information provided by families about their child is often given much lower weighting than that from professionals, which as well as being disrespectful, is disregarding an enormously important resource – i.e. those who know the child best, and who will be the school's central partner in supporting the child's learning. Some particular experiences reported, many of which suggest a need for improved communication and co-ordination, include:

- A lack of transfer of the wealth of information provided both prior to and following the child's enrolment to classroom teachers. This clearly has major implications for the ready accommodation of the child's particular strengths and needs right from the beginning of their schooling – and can lead to unnecessary repetition of assessment processes by the teacher.
- Similarly, contacts made with the school by external agencies involved with supporting the child during the prior-to-school period, and which could offer some transitional consultative support to teaching staff, are not always passed on to the relevant people.

- The process of applying for specialised equipment is often a frustrating one, with waiting periods of up to 12 months. This is clearly quite unacceptable when such equipment may be critical to the child's ability to fully access the whole range of learning and social elements of the school environment. It is also, once again, extremely distressing for families when such obstacles are placed in the way of their child's right to be a fully participating member of the school community right from the beginning.

**6. Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors.**

- As suggested in Item 4 above, some transitional support services offered by those in the early childhood / early childhood intervention sector are not always used in an effective way. However, across the board, therapy services are not highly accessible to school-aged children and their families – particularly for those who do not have the option of seeing a therapist in private practice (for reasons either of cost or availability). Publicly-provided services (through NSW Health, or Ageing, Disability and Home Care teams) are limited and all have lengthy waiting lists. A promising pilot programme (the ADHC-funded Therapy Transition Program), which is currently operating only in a small number of locations in metropolitan Sydney, offers targeted therapy support to children during the 6 months prior to school and the first 6 months of their Kindergarten year, in recognition that this is a critical period.
- Of additional note is that access to consultative support from experienced special educators is often also very much lacking, apart from that which is sometimes available during the process of transitioning from an early childhood intervention / mainstream early childhood service to school. The latter is by necessity limited, given that ECI and other EC programmes are generally funded to provide services only up until school entry. NSW DET formerly provided support positions that included a focus

on the particular needs of children with additional needs during their transition to and early years at school i.e. Early Learning Program Co-ordinators. When occupied by people with a strong background and training in both early childhood and special education, these positions played a very valuable role in supporting children, families and classroom staff during this critical transition period, as well as providing a much-needed co-ordination point between all concerned (including external agencies). These positions have since been subsumed by a limited number of Disability Program Consultants whose responsibilities cover the whole school age-range (K-12), so there is very little availability to provide much-needed support of the transition-to-school process.

- We are unaware of any specific issues regarding school counsellor support to children with disabilities and their families.

#### **7. The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and ongoing professional training.**

Teacher (and teacher's aide) training in all its forms is clearly absolutely critical to the success of every child's experiences of learning. Of equal importance is the engendering of positive attitudes towards, and promotion of, a fully inclusive school community by all school staff. To provide a quality learning environment for children with a wide spectrum of abilities, teachers (and their aides) very evidently require training and continuing support in accommodating the diversity of students to be found in all classrooms. Without it, there can be a tendency for staff to feel that children with identified additional needs should be placed in a special class or school.

There are a number of basic principles which may assist in achieving this outcome:

- All pre-service training course subjects (both theoretical and applied) should reflect the wide-ranging student learning needs that every teacher will encounter. It is simply

not sufficient (or indeed desirable) to delegate the concept of “teaching students with additional learning needs” to a single subject within a 4 year course.

- For more specialised knowledge that may be required to meet the needs of a particular student, the above sound foundation should lend itself to much greater flexibility on the part of teachers when they need to add this new layer of expertise to their portfolio of pedagogical skills.
- Existing teaching staff (who quite commonly report a lack of confidence in their preparation for supporting a student with identified additional needs) require continuing education reflecting the principles and practice of inclusive education and the accommodation of diverse learning needs. This must be readily available to teachers, regardless of geographical location, with follow-up support by teleconferencing and/or web-based discussion, etc. if there are practical challenges to providing face-to-face meetings. Schools must also receive (and be required to allocate) sufficient levels of professional development funds to provide for such ongoing training (and support).
- Teachers' aides should be just that i.e. provide classroom support and assistance under the close direction of the classroom teacher, and not be expected to take on an independent teaching role. They, too, however, should undertake both pre-service and ongoing professional training, which should include a focus on not encouraging children's dependence on them; and being particularly sensitive to the concept of students being included e.g. by not inadvertently creating a barrier between the student with a disability and their peers. Schools should be actively discouraged from appointing untrained aides – but this also remains a funding issue, given the relatively low allocations that are often provided for the support of individual children.



## ECIA NSW POSITION STATEMENT

### INCLUSION

Early Childhood Intervention Australia (NSW Chapter) is the peak organisation in NSW for professionals who support young children with additional needs and their families. ECIA NSW is committed to the principles of family partnership based upon collaborative planning that reflects each family's individual strengths, needs and priorities. It respects the family's right to make decisions and to take responsibility for directing their own lives.

Inclusion embraces and values the diversity of individual abilities and complies with Article 23 from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see attached). It fosters a sense of belonging and general well-being by providing opportunities to freely explore positive learning environments that build on strengths. It offers choices to children, as they grow, which encourage and foster their learning potential; and it enables them to participate independently in community life, while developing confidence and a strong sense of self.

An inclusive environment is holistic by nature and recognises the unique contribution each child and their family make to the richness of a diverse community. It creates an atmosphere of tolerance and nurtures community connectedness in ways that influence positive relationships and build social supports.

ECIA NSW believes that an inclusive early childhood learning environment is one that responds positively to the uniqueness of each individual child and their family. This involves the development and implementation of strategies to meet individual needs in areas including communication, mobility, socialisation and functional skills, which increase the child's capacity to engage in and contribute to all aspects of their daily life.

ECIA NSW endorses practices that promote, encourage and support inclusion and which lay the foundation for each child's successful participation within a diverse community.

*Adopted November 2008*

**PERMISSION TO COPY NOT REQUIRED – DISTRIBUTION ENCOURAGED ON  
BASIS OF AUTHOR BEING ACKNOWLEDGED**

ECIA (NSW Chapter); [www.ecia-nsw.org.au](http://www.ecia-nsw.org.au)

## ***United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child***

### ***Article 23***

1. States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.
2. States Parties recognize the right of the disabled child to special care and shall encourage and ensure the extension, subject to available resources, to the eligible child and those responsible for his or her care, of assistance for which application is made and which is appropriate to the child's condition and to the circumstances of the parents or others caring for the child.
3. Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance extended in accordance with paragraph 2 of the present article shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, taking into account the financial resources of the parents or others caring for the child, and shall be designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development
4. States Parties shall promote, in the spirit of international cooperation, the exchange of appropriate information in the field of preventive health care and of medical, psychological and functional treatment of disabled children, including dissemination of and access to information concerning methods of rehabilitation, education and vocational services, with the aim of enabling States Parties to improve their capabilities and skills and to widen their experience in these areas. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs of developing countries.